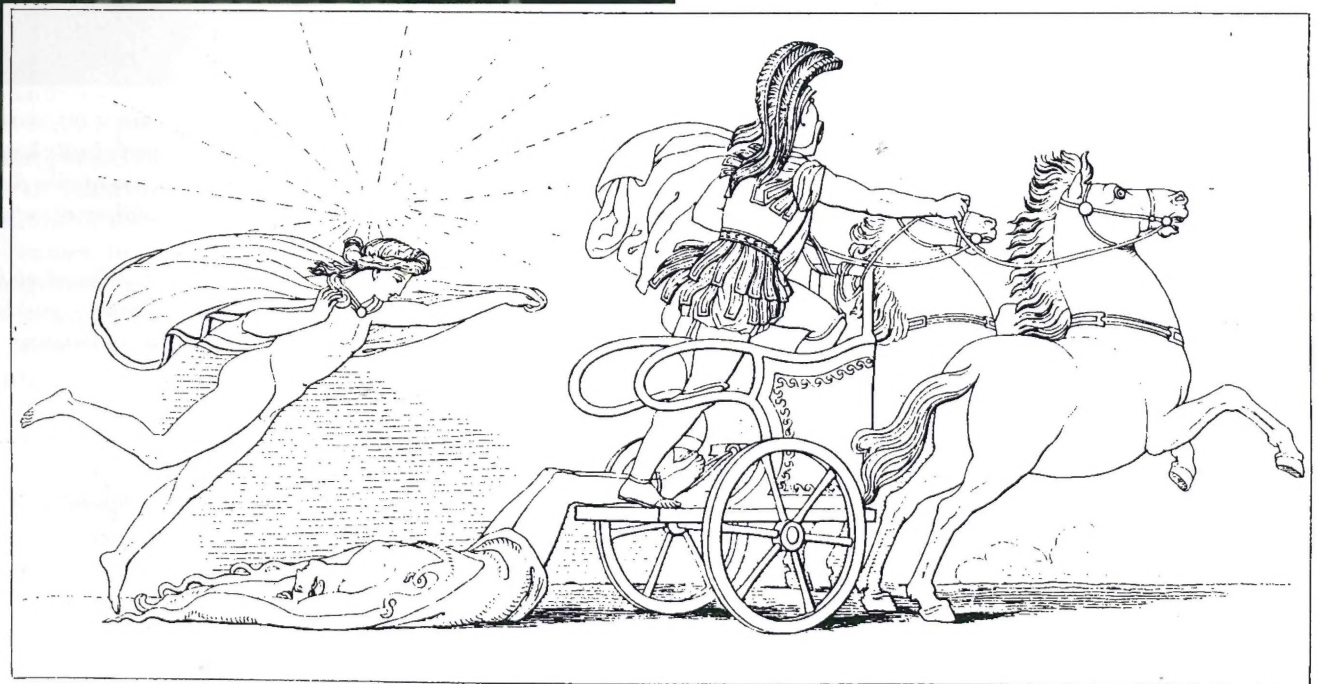


The Alexander Thomson Society NEWSLETTER

Nº16, MAY 1996



Thomson's Lost and Found



Flaxman inv.

HECTOR'S BODY DRAGGED AT THE CAR OF ACHILLES.

J. Moore sculp.

**Printing by Numbers: Blackie's
Village & Cottage Architecture**

CASES

St Vincent Street Church

At long last, there is constructive progress towards the full restoration of Thomson's only surviving intact church. The notion that it would best be transferred from local authority ownership to a charitable trust has been mooted for some time; now it is a real possibility. In the last days of Glasgow District Council, (former) Councillor Patricia Chalmers succeeded in obtaining an agreement in principle for a proposed St Vincent Street Church Trust to take over the building, subject to conditions set by the Council and the guarantee of a satisfactory use which will permit full access by the general public.

The new Trust cannot take over the building until all financial arrangements have been satisfactorily concluded and the securing of grant aid confirmed, and this may be some way in the future. Nor is the new Trust yet properly established, but the aim is to start on the restoration of the exterior stonework before *annus mirabilis* MCMXCIX.

The Convener of The St Vincent Street Church Trust is Patricia Chalmers and the proposed Trustees are The Lord Prosser (President), John Gerrard, Professor Andor Gomme, Dr James Macaulay, Professor Charles McKean, Georgina Nayler, Alan Stewart and your Chairman, plus representatives from Scottish Mutual and British Telecom, both of which occupy adjacent buildings.

Egyptian Halls

We are relieved to be able to report progress here, as Thomson's finest commercial building is now deteriorating badly owing to criminal neglect and may not be able to survive another winter. The problem, of course, is the recalcitrant owner of the upper floors, as Portfolio Holdings plc, owner of the four



Aberdeen University's George Washington Wilson Photographic Archive is the source for this photograph, ostensibly of the Ca d'Oro, but also showing the newly-built (hence gleaming) Egyptian Halls, with its lamp standards still in place. The two smaller flanking buildings, both later replaced, would have given Egyptian Halls additional impact on the streetscape.

The picture was first identified as a photocopy in the Mitchell Library, followed up by a more recent visit to the archive in Aberdeen. Although he took many pictures of buildings across Glasgow, this appears to be the only one in which a major Thomson building appears with any clarity.

We know that a number of demolished Thomson buildings may now only appear obliquely in photographs of other neighbouring buildings. Do you have family photographs of friends or relatives in Glasgow's streets dating back some years which may feature Thomson buildings in the background? Why not hunt through that biscuit tin and find out?

ground floor shops, is keen to have the building restored.

Last September, an Urgent Works Notice was served under Section 97 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act on Mr Man Fung Lung, and, as these were not carried out, the Council made repairs to the roof and front main parapet gutter. And in February, the Planning

Committee gave approval for a Listed Buildings Compulsory Purchase Order to be prepared for the whole title to the upper floors of Egyptian Halls. We have long argued that this is the only way forward and we congratulate the Council on grasping this particular nettle.

Continued on Page 12

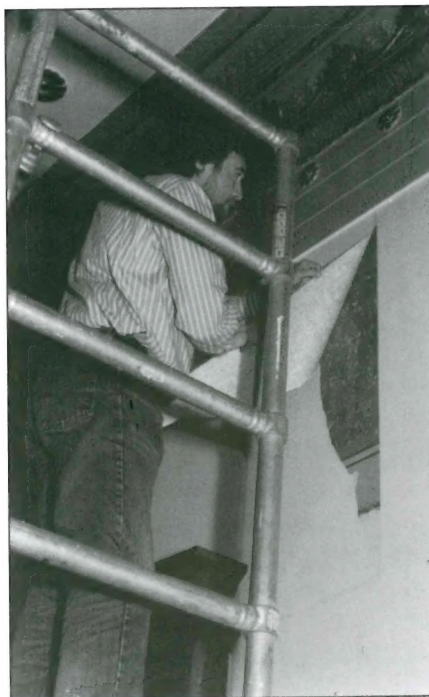
schemes"⁵, but the rich colours, reds, golds, blacks, and the elements of the subsidiary wall patterns, palmettes, and rosettes, acanthus and anthemions, ultimately derive from the vocabulary of the ancient Greek vase painters. The continuous narra-

tive band composed of scenes from the *Iliad* framed between decorative friezes, recalls red-figure vases, particularly those done in the style of the painter Kleophrades.

Thomson's narrative scenes are copied almost exactly from drawings by John Flaxman (1755-1826) who, in his early days, designed for Wedgwood ware, and whose work expresses more than a passing familiarity with Greek vases. Collections such as Sir William Hamilton's were very much in vogue at the time, and certainly were inspirational to the young artist. In a letter of 13th March, 1792 Flaxman wrote to Hamilton telling him of his admiration for [his] 'superb collection of vases'⁶.

Flaxman's self-conscious spare austerity' would have appealed to Greek Thomson who wanted not to copy the Greeks but to do as they would have done. "The strict linearity, [of Flaxman's illustrations] without shading or modelling was certainly the result of a conscious effort to produce 'outlines' suitable for the engraver"⁷. It was also the style imposed by circumstances on the ancient vase painters. In recreating scenes from what is the oldest complete book in European literary history (*accepting that it was originally an oral composition*) it would seem fitting, especially to Thomson, that they be done in the same manner as the oldest record of Greek pictorial art, that found on its pottery. Comparison with vase painting therefore seems wholly justifiable: ambiguous enough through the veil provided by Flaxman to have appealed to Thomson who was never completely straightforward in his use of sources, nor according to his friend Gildard, unaware of the beauty of the Greek vase, "There may be more artistic genius in a Greek vase than in Trajan's column."⁸

Between the wall decoration and ornate ceiling cornice, the frieze covers three sides of the rectangular din-



Uncovering the murals.

Photo: Historic Scotland

ing room. Where they were not separated by the cornered pilasters of the indented sideboard alcove, the scenes were originally divided by flat, painted pillar-like structures with tripodal bases. Unfortunately the work of modern paper hangers has removed most of these interesting paper structures, only one or two are still *in situ*. Similar to the painted devices used by the Greeks to separate the narrative episodes on their vases, they are also almost identical in style to Thomson's street-lamp standards. A preparatory drawing, either for these paper-backed scene dividers or for proposed street-lamps – there is no indication of scale – exists alongside other sketches on a sheet of Thomson's drawings held in the Mitchell Library.

The window-end of the room, by virtue of the ceiling-to-floor height of the windows, is free from any panels. Opposite, a small rectangular area is recessed to accommodate a marble-topped sideboard and dramatically top-lit to focus attention on this monumental piece of furniture. Above the sideboard, and directly below

'The Council of The Gods' there is an extra panel, 'Homer Invoking the Muse'.

That the sideboard could be so easily mistaken for an altar is not without significance. Invocation, the starting point for any ancient work of poetry, would, in times past, certainly have involved some act of sacrifice requiring the presence of an altar, or something that stood for and fulfilled that function. The food in Mr Couper's dining-room, therefore, quite naturally played its part in the Homeric decorative scheme. Any student of ancient Greek faced, as often they were, with the dubious delight of translating 'unseen', passages from Homer's *Iliad*, will remember just how regularly the heroes slaughtered ox or kid. Impromptu sacrifices fairly littered the text and the beaches of bronze-age Troy; altars loomed large and burned hot in ancient Greece. 'Savoury odours mixed with curling smoke, rose up into the sky'⁹.

The monochrome technique and the colours used in the frieze in the Holmwood dining-room, with ochre figures acting out their destiny on pale terra cotta plains against an azure blue sky now faded green, play an important role in our association with the past and with traditional representational methods. A link through time to the art of the vase painter, who illustrated the history and mythology celebrated by the poets: their small decorative panels, the picture books of ancient Greece, still inspire generations of artists.

The scenes are selective. Even Homer did not describe the whole Trojan war, taking, as the prologue makes clear, "The wrath of Achilles [as his] theme" and covering, it has been reckoned, only fifty days of a ten-year conflict. Flaxman was equally selective, illustrating thirty-nine scenes which in the 1805 edition of the *Iliad* used by Thomson, are given exact textual references.

If Thomson chose the scenes, did he actually draw them? The Mitchell



Library hold five of the original cartoons, unfortunately all unsigned. They came to the library from Thomson's office. Gildard speaking of Holmwood seems to support the notion, "Besides the decoration much of the furniture, solid and textile was designed by Mr Thomson"¹⁰, as Dr James Macaulay points out also from another piece by Gildard: "In some instances he painted the figure with his own hand, and in many drew all the stencils"¹¹.

It may also be significant that the section on Holmwood in *Villa and Cottage Architecture* is the only one in which there is no mention of payment to painters. Did Thomson do the stencil work himself? Neither, in the illustrations of the plans and perspectives, does Thomson depict the actual scenes used at Holmwood. Indeed, at least two of those used in the book are not from Flaxman's work: they look more like biblical subjects. Is Thomson by omission suggesting that given a free hand he would have chosen differently, or is it that ten years on he has just forgotten which scenes he actually did use? He did after all, in the same section, give misleading information on the decorative scheme for the drawing room.

With regard to the actual selection and whoever made it, the sensibilities of a mixed audience of dinner guests

had to be considered. Omissions therefore include the most gruesome episodes such as 'The Funeral Pile of Patroclus', fuelled by the heaped bodies of naked warriors and horses; the most violent, such as 'Ajax defending the Greek Ships'; and the purely divine, that is those which involve only the gods, such as 'Vulcan rising from the Sea'. Many profound scenes especially those dealing with Priam's claims for the body of his son Hector, are also omitted.

Of course the size of the room and the height of the ceiling must have played an important part in the number of panels chosen. All thirty-nine could have been included but they would have been too small to see clearly. Instead, three main subjects emerge, the gods, the exploits of Achilles, and the noble activities of Hector, Prince of Troy. Each is restricted to certain areas: gods, at the centre – in the 'Council of the Gods' grouped accurately according to which side, Greek or Trojan, they supported with various scenes of divine involvement on either side. Facing each other along the two side walls events in the Greek camp mirror episodes involving the Trojans. The opposition is even more specific, in the contrast and cross referencing of the exploits of the two heroes, Achilles and Hector. And, as if to emphasise the brutality of Achilles,

his terrible tantrums are countered by the wise and noble actions of the Trojan hero.

Could the opposition between Greek and Turk – for Troy is in Turkey – have been fuelled by an interest in the wars of Greek Independence popularised earlier in Britain by the fatal involvement of Lord Byron? Also it may be relevant that the year before Holmwood was built, Britain was allied to Turkey in the Crimean War. Contemporary events may have contributed to the partisan arrangement of the scenes and the rather 'un-Greek' bias in favour of the Trojans. Not what one would expect from Thomson, given his fondness for things Greek. However more research is required before any relationship between contemporary events and the subject matter of the frieze can be further substantiated.

The Crimean war was much on Victorian minds and Robert Couper, the patron's brother, was Captain of the Cathcart Volunteers so presumably, to that family at least, current military matters would not be without significance. If this argument is acceptable, then over two thousand years on, the causes and effects of the Trojan war face each other with even greater relevance across a nineteenth century Glasgow dining room.

'The Judgment of Paris' in which

Paris chooses Aphrodite as the most beautiful of them all, sets the Goddesses against one another and, as legend has it, starts the Trojan war. Countering this, Aphrodite forces a reluctant Helen into Paris' bedchamber. Other scenes of divine intervention follow; 'Thetis Beseeching Zeus' a connivance which weighted the outcome against poor Hector is balanced as Zeus sends 'An Evil Dream to Agamemnon' hampering for a time the cause of the Greeks. Further on, along the side walls, the two heroes face one another. Achilles sulks at the removal of his slave girl Briseis: across the room, noble Hector chides Paris for dallying with his lover while brave men die on their behalf.

An aspect of the Greek's uncontrollable emotions is demonstrated as Achilles weeps unheroically over the loss of his friend Patroclus: opposite, a more dignified example from the Trojan camp is outlined, as Hector bids his wife and child a poignant farewell. Finally, victor against vanquished: the result of the duel between Achilles and Hector is exposed in savage retribution as Achilles drags the body of his noble opponent around the walls of Troy. A corresponding panel depicts Andromache fainting at the sight of her husband's cruel fate. Thus the death of Hector is shown twice, once from a Greek point of view, and again on the opposing wall, through the eyes of the Trojans.

At the window-end of each wall, the two 'tail-end' scenes are of interest. 'Thetis Ordering the Nereids back to the Stormy Deep', has been changed from a horizontal format to a vertical one, reversing the image so that the goddess faces into the room. The size of the Nereid group is reduced and one of their number removed, presumably to balance the composition within a vertical framework. The other, 'Juno Commanding the Sun to Set', is changed in the same way, but there is also more direct evidence of



Thetis ordering the Nereids into the Sea, as executed (above) and as originally drawn (right)

Thomson's intervention. An open palmette motif is added to Juno's tiara; a classical feature generally associated with Thomson's cast-iron palings. This particular improvement is more obvious in the cartoon for this panel, lodged in the Mitchell Library Archives¹².

The Invocation scene is 'tidied up' as Thomson improves on Flaxman's rather clumsy handling of the relationship between the two figures. In the original the muse appeared as if she was perched on the strap of Homer's lyre. In his illustrations of ancient texts Flaxman's first duty was to the clarity of the narrative; the quality of the design often seems to have taken second place: "my intention is to show how any story may be represented in a series of compositions on the principles of the ancients"¹³.

Only in one panel is Flaxman's design altered radically. Thomson has split the panel, 'Otus and Ephialtes holding Mars Captive' to frame the 'Council of the Gods', sep-

arating these remarkable figures and legitimising the nonchalantly crossed legs and relaxed poses by adding a pile of armour presumably stripped from the unfortunate captive. As described, the frieze is no straightforward chronological account of the Trojan War, nor is it directly copied from the sequences of the *Iliad*. Scenes have been changed to improve them aesthetically, and taken out of context to give currency to this old tale. Generally, changes to Flaxman's drawings are kept at a minimum. Thomson's startling effects are achieved less by artistic alteration than by the opposition of one scene against another.

Interior decorators have interpreted the *Iliad* in many ways: Gavin Hamilton's late eighteenth century decorative scheme for the Borghese Palace which Flaxman must have known, pays particular attention to scenes which depict the origins of the conflict. Hector is popular elsewhere in Scotland appearing as hero in earlier decorative schemes, for example "...the appearance of Hector occurs again in Fife at Balcarres House"¹⁴. It may also be pertinent to mention the carved interior friezes of the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, taken into the British Museum Collection in 1815 and depicting not the Trojan War but the legendary battles between Lapiths and Centaurs. An external frieze at Ickworth¹⁵, depicting scenes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* which demonstrates the flexibility of the new Coade stone as a medium for carving, is also worth mentioning. And of course, there were Thomas Hope's period rooms at The Deepdene and his Duchess Street Mansion¹⁶ to which Flaxman contributed.

However there is a possible source of inspiration nearer home. Laurieston House, Carlton Place, Glasgow, designed by Peter Nicholson (circa 1805) whose granddaughter Jane, was married to Thomson, also has scenes from the

Iliad as a decoration for the dining room. Like Hamilton's scheme for the Borghese, some of the themes are rather obscure and relate possibly to the origins of the Judgment of Paris, but these are minor panels. The main panels, richly worked and decorated plaster roundels, oppose the actions of two Trojan heroes, Hector and Aeneas. Facing each other across the dining table, these scenes, both poignant farewells, emphasise family duty and loyalty, sentiments which are expressed throughout

the house. So at Laurieston, just as at Holmwood, it seems as though the tales of the past were plundered to produce relevant material to emphasise an acceptable tone of family life and pursuits.

Perhaps at Holmwood, Thomson was not the only mind at work. Little has been said about the patron, James Couper and his possible contribution. From all accounts the brothers Couper were typical of Glasgow's *nouveau riche*. "About the year 1841, Mr Robert Couper, took a lease of the mill – [Millholm] – and latterly became proprietor." ... "In 1853 ... Mr James Couper, who was a carpenter in the village joined his brother in the business"¹⁷. Not on the face of it, fertile ground for a classicist, or someone who knew his Homer intimately. However, an entry in the *University of Glasgow Matriculation Album, 1720–1858* mentions a 'Jacobus Couper, filius secundus Jacobi Agricola, Com de Renfrew' who in 1832 studied Latin at the University. If this is our James, (the name and age are about right,

and Cathcart was originally in the county of Renfrew) then it is possible that Thomson was working with or under instruction of an enlightened patron, one of those Glasgow merchants who in the decoration of their homes, sought a rather grand "persona behind which [they might] relax"¹⁸. However, a lot more research into the Couper family history has to be done before we can pronounce Thomson's patron and Jacobus Couper one and the same person.

Nevertheless what has been uncovered of the murals not only demonstrates an individual approach to the literature of the past and a fertile imagination in "adopt[ing] the principles of Greek Art to modern requirements"¹⁹ but enriches our knowledge of the cultural aspirations of Glasgow's Victorian merchant class. The dining room at Holmwood reinforces one aspect of contemporary opinion, "there is one living architect of genius, Mr Alexander Thomson, who by his works is at the present day showing that Greek Art,

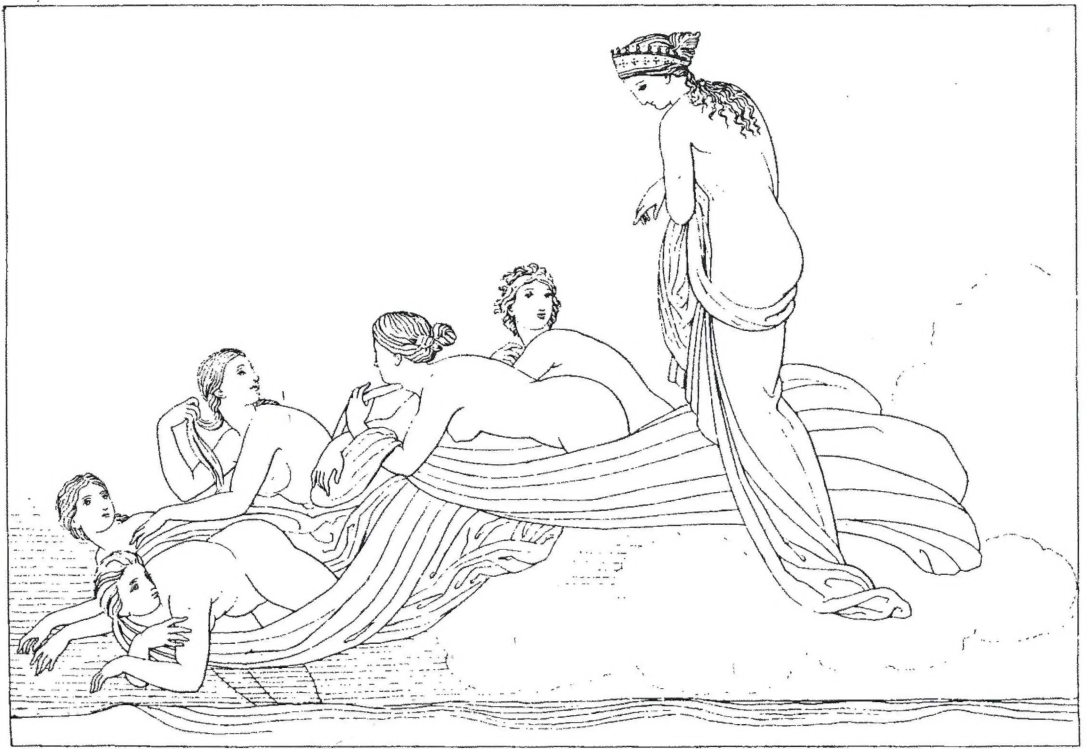
properly used, can be applied with success to the buildings required for ordinary use in Glasgow"²⁰.

NOTES

1. Extracts from Gildard's preparatory notes for a lecture given before Glasgow Architectural Association, 30 June 1888. Two sets of preparatory notes, dated 22 February 1887 being... 'a brief review of some of his more distinguished works.'

2. Ibid.

3. John Flaxman, Artist & Sculptor (1755-1826). In 1793 Flaxman's 34 illustrations for Homer's *Iliad*, engraved by Piroli, were published in Rome. As far as can be gathered there were two sets of plates. In 1795 the second set was sent to London to be published. A second London edition was printed in 1805, containing a further five scenes – three engraved by Blake, 'Homer invoking the Muse', 'Minerva Repressing the anger of Achilles', and 'Thetis Entreating Zeus' – and two engraved by James Parker, 'The Meeting of Hector & Andromache' and 'The



THETIS ORDERING THE NEREIDS TO DESCEND INTO THE SEA.

Figures in

Edwards

Printing by Numbers

WHILE *Villa & Cottage Architecture* is famous as the source of information for Holmwood, the Double Villa and other of Alexander Thomson's designs, the ingenious system used by Blackie & Son to sell and distribute the book has gone largely unnoticed.

The Blackies referred to the system as the Number Trade and its essential features were that a work was published in instalments (strictly speaking numbers or parts), and that the instalments were sold mainly by agents calling at a purchaser's home. The principal reason for selling a book in instalments was to be able to supply customers who lacked the wherewithal to buy the complete book. Such a customer, by agreeing to accept instalments at stated inter-

vals, was enabled to acquire an otherwise prohibitively expensive volume in affordable stages.

There were two agents involved in each transaction, both with largely self-explanatory titles; the Canvasser, whose function was to secure the order, and the Deliverer who was responsible for delivering the instalments and collecting the payments. The Blackies' publicity material was at pains to stress that the Number Trade was a ready money system and that payment on delivery was "strongly and universally insisted upon".

When *Villa & Cottage Architecture* was launched the final content of the book had not been decided and the early publicity (below) stated that it was to be published "in about eighteen parts" and that the "names of

other contributors will hereafter be announced". Once all of the initial instalments had been printed the book could be offered (right) as "complete in twenty parts at 2s 6d each ... or half-morocco 65s". The collected instalments could of course be bound into one volume and Blackie & Son also advertised their services as bookbinders (far right).

The printing records of *Villa & Cottage Architecture* (bottom right) show the first instalment being produced in December 1865, the next ten in 1866, a further seven in 1867 and the last two in 1868. By the time the final instalment appeared in May 1868 the first instalment had already been reprinted three times and although all the instalments were to be reprinted repeatedly over the next nineteen years more than half of the eventual total output had been produced by August 1868. The number of copies in each reprint varied from a thousand down to a hundred and the constant matching of supply to demand was a major advantage of the Number Trade for each print-run was substantially pre-sold and the risk of over-estimating future demand or of producing unsaleable work was very nearly eliminated.

Blackie & Son obviously intended to supply complete sets of twenty instalments but it is clear from the large variation in the print totals that there must have been substantial sales of individual instalments and of part sets. It now seems unlikely that the instalments which contained Alexander Thomson's contributions can be identified as only bound volumes appear to have survived; these do not even mention that the work was first published in instalments while the various chapters vary greatly in length and do not lend themselves to division by twenty. When the printing of *Villa & Cottage Architecture* ceased in June 1887 the total output of the best and worst-selling instalments, the first and the twentieth, had reached 9,000 and 4,750 copies respectively.

Blackie & Son are often mentioned in connection with the engravings of John Martin's paintings which appeared in *The Imperial Family Bible*. This Bible was also a product of the Number Trade and was available in thirty-eight parts.

Acknowledgment

The Society thanks Glasgow University Archives and Business Records Centre for access to the Blackie & Son Collection and permission to reproduce the illustrations.

Colin MacKellar

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Village and Cottage Architecture

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The Illustrations will consist of finely executed Engravings of Plans, Elevations, and Sections, carefully reduced to scale from the working Drawings. Wherever it is found requisite or desirable, the whole four sides of the house will be shown; and Perspective Views, and Enlarged Drawings of the Ornamental and Constructive details will be added as occasion may require.

Villas and Cottages that have been erected from the designs of the following Architects will be illustrated and described. Names of other contributors will hereafter be announced.

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HINE AND EVANS, NOTTINGHAM.
H. E. KENDALL, JUNR., LONDON.

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J. T. ROCHEAD, GLASGOW.
A. & G. THOMSON, GLASGOW.
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S. DUTTON WALKER,
NOTTINGHAM.

other contributors will hereafter be announced". Once all of the initial instalments had been printed the book could be offered (right) as "complete in twenty parts at 2s 6d each ... or half-morocco 65s". The collected instalments could of course be bound into one volume and Blackie & Son also advertised their services as bookbinders (far right).

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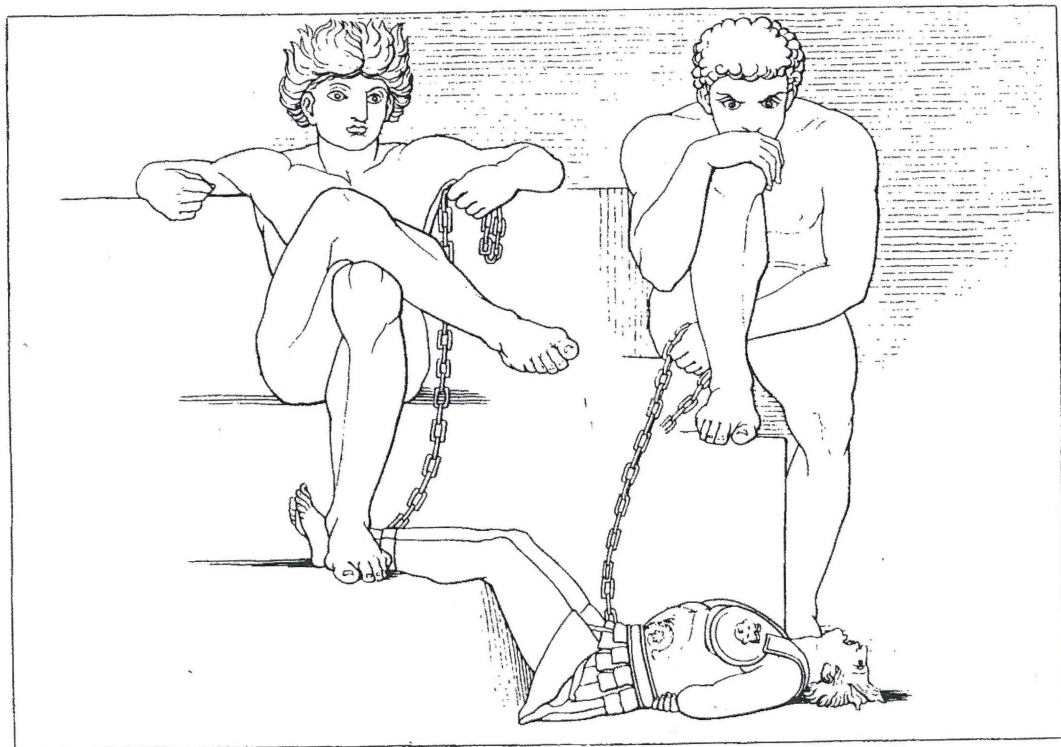
BLACKIE & SON.

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Commenced
in 1885

Villa & Cottage Architecture

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Oct	1000	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
Nov	"	1000	"	"	1000	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
1888																				
Jan	"	"	"	"	500	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	500	500	500	"	"	"
Apr	"	"	500	"	"	"	500	500	500	500	"	"	"	"	"	"	500	"	"	500



OTUS AND EPHIALTES HOLDING MARS CAPTIVE

Judgement of Paris'. As all of these additional scenes were included in the frieze at Holmwood, it seems evident that Thomson used the 1805 edition or at least a later copy.

4. Ibid, note 1.

5. Alexander Thomson, 'Daniel Cottier, and the Interior of Queen's Park Church', Sally Joyce Rush, 'Greek' Thomson, ed. Stamp & McKinstry, 1994. Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* was published in 1856.

6. David Irwin, *English Neo-Classical Art*, 1966, p.61.

7. Robert R. Wark, *Drawings By John Flaxman in the Huntington Collection*.

8. Ibid note 1.

9. Homer's *Iliad*, 1.316.

10. Ibid note 1.

11. 'Greek' Thomson's Literary and Pictorial Sources', 'Greek' Thomson, ed. Stamp & McKinstry. Dr Macaulay quotes from Gildard's obituary published in *The Architect*, 26 March 1875.

12. The Art Department of the Mitchell Library Archive holds a number of cartoons for the Holmwood murals, squared up for enlargement or transfer, among its

collection of drawings by Thomson.

13. A letter in 1793 [written when he was in Rome] from Flaxman to his friend Hayley.

14. G. Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork of Great Britain*.

15. Ickworth, 1796-1830, near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, was designed for the 4th Earl of Bristol, Bishop of Derry by Francis Sandys. The sculpture and carving by Flaxman and Carabelli.

16. The Deepdene, and his townhouse in Duchess Street, London converted circa 1801-4 to house Thomas Hope's Collection of antiquities, was decorated with a mixture of ancient Greek and Egyptian figures and motifs.

17. Gartshore's *Cathcart Memories*, 1938, p23, p61.

18. 'In Search of Purity', C. McKean, 'Greek' Thomson, ed. Stamp & McKinstry.

19. Extract from Gildard's obituary, op. cit.

20. Extract from Gildard's preparatory notes which reports a speech by Professor T. Roger Smith at the Society of Arts, London.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my research for this article I have milked the wisdom and assistance of many. I should like to acknowledge their help: The Archive Departments at the University of Glasgow and the Mitchell Library; Mr Philip Schrieber & Mrs Marny Morrison (for her schematic sketch of the arrangement of the murals) of N.T.S.; Mr Alan Ferdinand, Historic Scotland; Mr John King, Strathclyde Buildings Preservation Trust; Mr Ian Gow, National Monuments Record, Edinburgh; Dr & Mrs Ronald Knox, University of Glasgow.

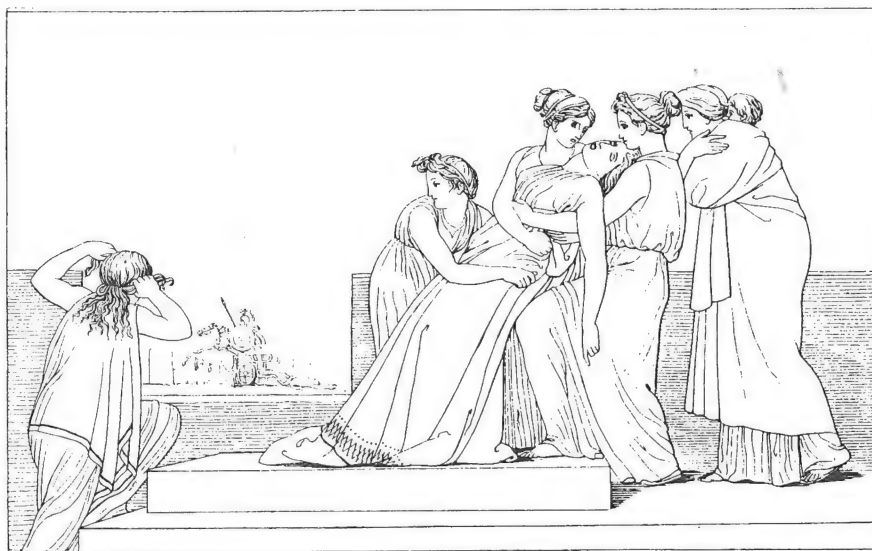
Finally for reading my text before publication, for suggesting amendments which made some sense of several confusing passages, and for encouraging me to widen the scope of this article, Dr James Macaulay, Mackintosh School of Architecture, Dr Gavin Stamp, Mackintosh School of Architecture, and Dr Clare Willson, History of Art Department, University of Glasgow.

POSTSCRIPT

ANNE Ellis's article suggests some fascinating possibilities about the history of Holmwood, some of which can be substantiated while others must remain speculation. What can, alas, be immediately dismissed is the notion that James Couper, the former carpenter, might also be Jacobus Couper, the classically-educated university graduate of 1832, for, as Colin McKellar, who has investigated the Couper brothers, points out, the Census reveals that Holmwood's James Couper was aged 32 in 1851. This paper maker was clearly *nouveau riche*.

What is particularly intriguing is the mention of the Crimean War of 1854–56. This conflict, soon followed by that in India, obviously had an impact on public opinion in Glasgow (until, perhaps, it was diverted in 1857 by the sensational murder trial of the delinquent daughter of James Smith, the architect chosen by Robert Couper to design his new home, 'Sunnyside'). That the building of Holmwood was connected with the Crimean War is, however, borne out by Mr McKellar's research. Alexander Gartshore's *Cathcart Memories* (1938) states that the Couper brothers rented the Millholm paper mill, that machinery was introduced there in 1853 and that the British Government placed large orders for the firm's writing paper. What is certain is that both James Couper and his elder brother Robert (who first leased the existing paper mill in 1841 and who by 1861, according to the Census, was employing 48 men, 10 boys, 87 women and 12 girls) suddenly became visibly wealthy at this time, respectively building the adjacent villas 'Holmwood' and 'Sunnyside' on land feued in 1857 – the year after the conclusion of hostilities in the Near East.

The use of scenes from Homer's



ANDROMACHE PAINTING ON THE WALL

Iliad as mural decoration in the dining room at Holmwood might therefore transcend fashion and be not only a contemporary comment on the heroism and brutality of war but also an indirect reference to the source of James Couper's new-found fortune. Contemporary references to the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, of course, are far from uncommon while the Victorians were steeped in Homer and politicians like Gladstone constantly referred to him, but the chronological closeness of the Crimean War and the building of this modern Grecian villa in Cathcart suggests a more specific reference. After all, if the Indian Mutiny had an effect on the design of the steeple of the St Vincent Street Church [*Newsletter* N°15], the Crimean War may also have had an impact on Thomson's fertile imagination.

If this is the case, are we justified in reading much more into Thomson's adaptation of Flaxman's images? Troy (yet to be investigated by Schliemann) was indeed in mainland Turkey-in-Asia, and Britain and France declared war on Russia in 1854 in defence of the Ottoman Empire. Greece was not involved in this conflict and, indeed, was hostile to the Allied intervention in favour of her old enemy and former overlord. As Anne Ellis observes, at the time of the Greek wars of independence, British public opinion had been overwhelmingly in favour of the Greeks, although this had cooled somewhat by the time of the ridiculous 'Don Pacifico' incident in 1850 when the Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston,

threatened the tiny Kingdom of Greece with the might of the Royal Navy in support of the dubious claims for compensation by a Portuguese Jew born in Gibraltar who claimed British citizenship. All this suggests that a new, contemporary interpretation of the *Iliad* theme could scarcely refer to modern Greece and modern Turkey.

So who are the Greeks and who are Trojans? During the Great War of 1914–18, British soldiers brought up on the Classics and landed at Gallipoli (not so very far from Troy) interpreted that disastrous intervention in terms of the *Iliad*; could the same have happened during the Crimean War? For the obvious contemporary parallel to the siege of Troy was the siege of Sebastopol, the Russian naval fortress on the Crimean peninsular in the Black Sea whose capture was the principal military objective during the conflict. So were Achilles' Greeks now the Anglo-Franco-Turkish forces under poor Lord Raglan and Marshall St Arnaud, and the Trojans the defending Russians inside their fortifications?

But Mrs Ellis suggests that the Holmwood frieze indicates more sympathy for the Trojans than for the Greeks. So did Thomson, or Couper, agree with an anti-war (rather than pro-Russian) faction in Glasgow? Although the war with the Russians which has been described as "the most unnecessary in the history of modern Europe" was overwhelmingly and disgustingly popular with all sections of the British public, it was

opposed by those great moral Radicals, Cobden and Bright. The original cause of war was a squabble between Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox monks over the guardianship of the Holy Places in Ottoman Palestine; did a few independently-minded Presbyterians consider that the Russian-backed Orthodox would be the better guardians against the the infidel Turk in Jerusalem? And, as the 'The Judgement of Paris' appears on the wall in Cathcart, can it be of any relevance that the Crimean War was terminated by the Congress of Paris in 1856?

Such speculation is surely very far-fetched. After all, if James Couper made a fortune out of supplying stationery to the government during the Crimean War, he is most unlikely to have been either anti-war or pro-Russian. The Crimean War – particularly the suffering of the army at Balaclava during the winter of 1854–55 – exposed glaring deficiencies in both the British civil service and in the military establishment. The immediate consequence was reform, and a growth in bureaucracy which required new War Office and Foreign Office buildings in Whitehall. And bureaucracy uses lots and lots of paper: the Couper brothers must have looked forward to another unnecessary war.

All we can really say with any certainty is that the Crimean War had some positive architectural consequences. One was the hilariously mis-managed New Government Offices competition of 1856–57 which gave rise to the 'Battle of the Styles' between Gothic and Classic and between Thomson's future enemy, George Gilbert Scott, and the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, eventually resulting in a new Foreign Office in the Italian style overlooking St James's Park. Another was that "exquisite little gem, at once classic and picturesque" – Holmwood in Cathcart.

Gavin Stamp

CASES

Continued from Page 2

Glasgow Cross

We have no news to report about proposals to rehabilitate the Thomson-Turnbull warehouses in Bell Street and Watson Street, which must be construed as bad news.

Caledonia Road Church

Although we remain exasperated with the Glasgow Development Agency and its creature, the Crown Street Regeneration Project, to consider constructive changes to the road plans for the area around the Caledonia Road Church – especially as the GDA has now applied to demolish the redundant railway viaduct to the west, which was originally proposed by Alan McCartney of the Historic Buildings Trust to enable the main north-south road to be shifted to the west of the church – we are pleased that the Glasgow Buildings Preservation Trust is now taking an active interest in proposals for the future of the structure. And we are pleased that the Director of the Year of Architecture and Design has singled out the Caledonia Road

Church as one of the city's historic buildings which needs to be restored for 1999.

Discussions have now taken place between the GBPT and both the Planning Department and the Director of the 1999 over the proposed architectural competition for the development of the contiguous land behind the church, possibly (and hopefully) for the Iona Community.

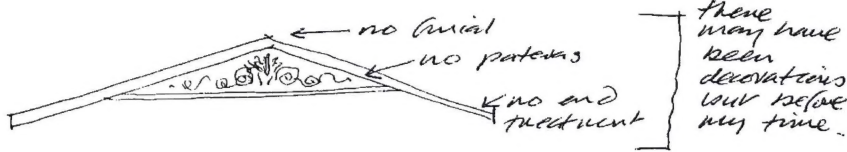
We continue to insist that the Caledonia Road Church should be restored, at least externally, so that its shell may be roofed over to serve a useful purpose. And, if this is done, we regard it as essential that the original lines of Hospital Street and Cathcart Road are maintained to the north, so that any new building behind relates properly and creatively with Thomson's church. It is so important to appreciate that the Caledonia Road Church was NOT a free-standing monument but an urban building carefully integrated into a pattern of stone tenements.

Otagone

We are sorry to have to report that the last chunk of the range of tenements in Otago Street (*below*) has now



Photos: Mark Baines



the decorated spandril was cut 'net-work' style from one or two thick timber panels.

Sketch by Dr Ronald McFadzean of the gable treatment at Castlehill as he recalls it before the alterations of c. 1960

been demolished. They were more conventional than most by Thomson, but had intriguing and odd details. In time-honoured local fashion, the corner block and short range along Gibson Street – which fully deserved to survive – went on fire and was condemned by Building Control.

Castlehill, 202 Nithsdale Road

In *Newsletters* 12 and 13 we recorded the unauthorised and stupid alterations made to Thomson's villa in Pollokshields, formerly a school, which were rightly halted by the Planning Department. Now we are pleased to learn that the house is in the hands of a different developer and that the unsympathetic Edinburgh architect is no longer involved.

The building has now been made into a single house again and efforts are being made to restore original features which have been destroyed. Our offer of advice and assistance, previously ignored, has now been accepted. We are sorry that the opportunity to replace the decorative wooden infill on the gables (*see sketch, above*), removed in c.1960, has not been taken up, but Castlehill is now looking rather better than it did.

Castlehill is now for sale, and seeks a sympathetic admirer of Thomson's architecture. Further details are available from C.L. Farleigh ARICS, 1 Aster Gardens, Southpark Village, G53 7XG. Tel: 0141 638 2160.

ACTIVITIES

FOLLOWING our visit to Liverpool last year, this year's 'foreign trip' saw members of the society (*below*) undertake an intrepid exploration of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, marvelling at the stark splendour of Belsay, engaging in a flypast of Vanbrugh's Seaton Delaval Hall, and reflecting calmly on the week-end's events at a Sunday morning service at Durham Cathedral for some (and looking for a different form of service at IKEA for others).

And next year? The granite classicism of Aberdeen and the North-East, possibly? Suggestions welcome to the Chairman at the usual address.

Glasgow's West End Festival

The Society is contributing to the new WEST END FESTIVAL in Glasgow being held this year. On **Saturday, 15th June** we are joining the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland in a conference to discuss 'Conservation and Innovation in the West End'. This will be in the Hillhead Library in Byres Road (where we are also putting up a small exhibition about Thomson): 10.00am to 4.00pm [£5 full day, £3 half day, £1 students (at the door)].

And in the evening of **Friday, 21st June** (Midsummer Day), Roger Guthrie will lead a walk around Thomson's buildings in the West End [Tickets from Hillhead Library, £3.50].

Vanduara (Paisley to you)

For ourselves, Sandy Stoddart will explore the considerable architectural glories of Paisley – the old Roman town of Vanduara – on **Saturday, 29th June**. Meet outside Paisley Abbey, next to the statue of the poet Tannahill near the Clark Town Hall, at 2.30pm.

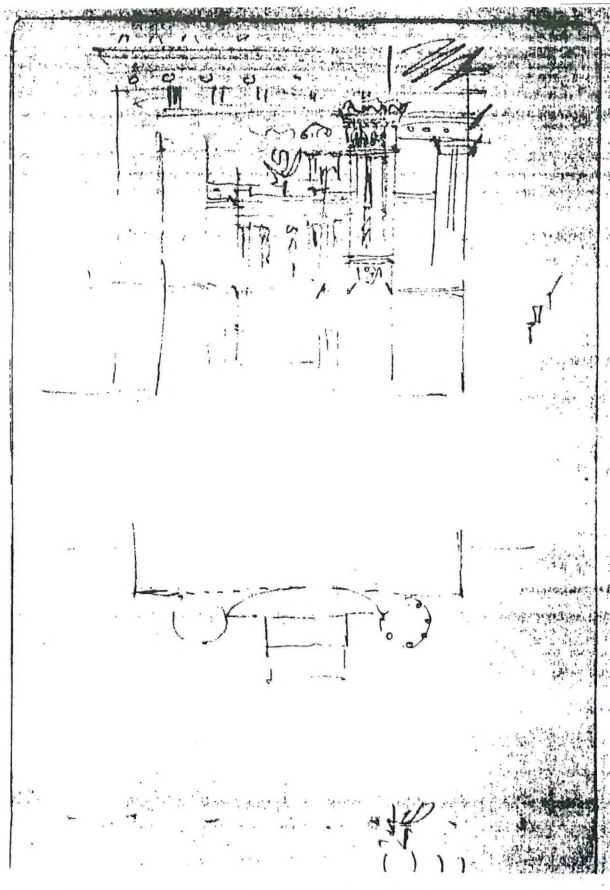
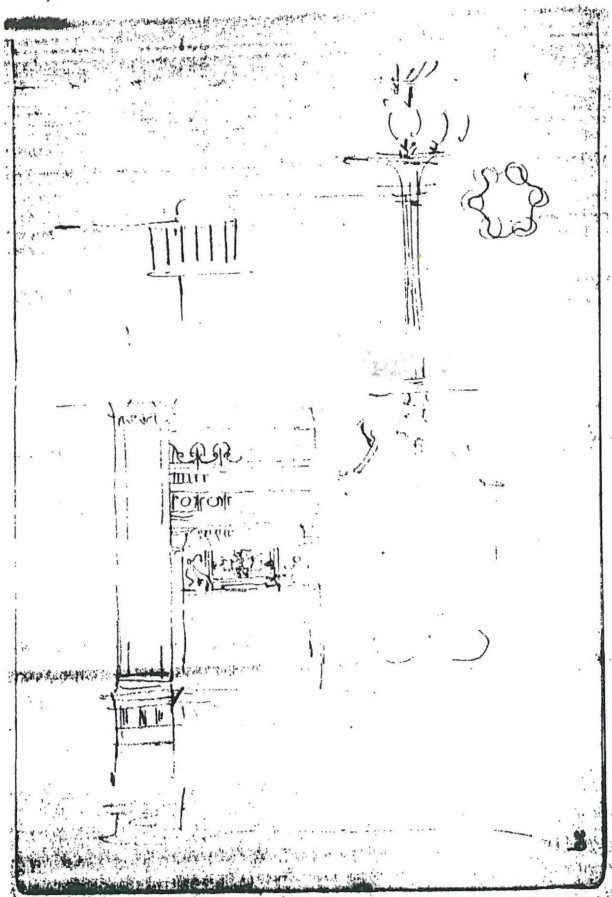
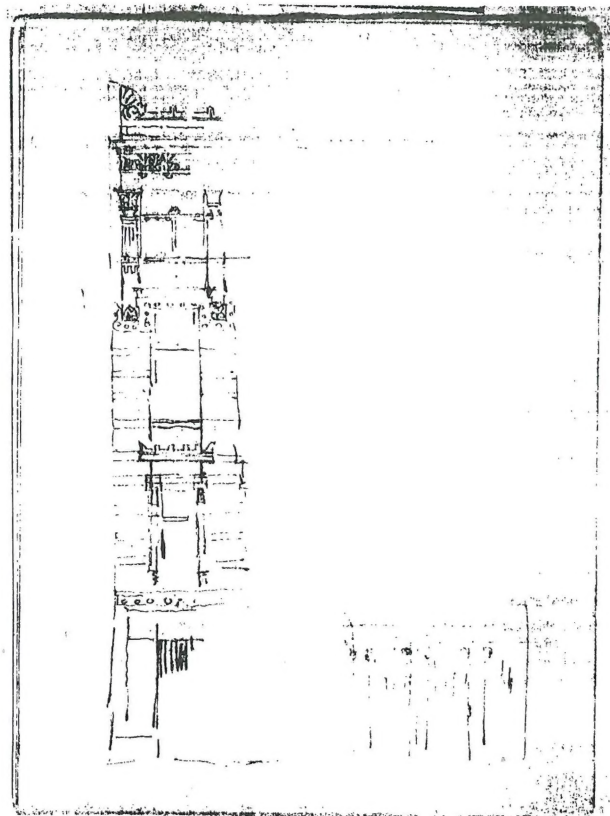


The Alexander Thomson Travelling Student

As our contribution to this Summer's Toshiemania, we reproduce three pages from one of three hitherto unknown sketchbooks by Charles Rennie Mackintosh recently 'discovered' in the National Library of Ireland.

Despite the myths about Mackintosh that continue to hold Glasgow in thrall, it has long been known that Mackintosh looked closely at contemporary and recent Scottish and English architecture and these early sketchbooks, dating from about 1888-91, confirm that their owner was well aware of the work of James MacLaren, James Sellars and, not least, that of the architect in whose memory a travelling studentship was endowed which, as the second winner, enabled him to travel to Italy in 1891 – Alexander Thomson.

One sheet (*right*) shows a bay of Thomson's long-lost Cairney Building in Bath Street. The other sheets present difficulties, however. The sketches appear to show a Thomsonesque organ case but, if so, which one? Professor David Walker suggests these are either original studies for the organ in the modern Grecian design for 'A Public Hall' which won the young Charles McIntosh the Thomson Studentship competition in 1890 or relate to the organ case in John Honeyman's contemporary unsuccessful competition design for the Kelvingrove Art Gallery. Readers' comments are invited.



More Temple Talk

Professor James Stevens Curl responds to Sam McKinstry's article on St Vincent Street church and its relationship to Solomon's Temple

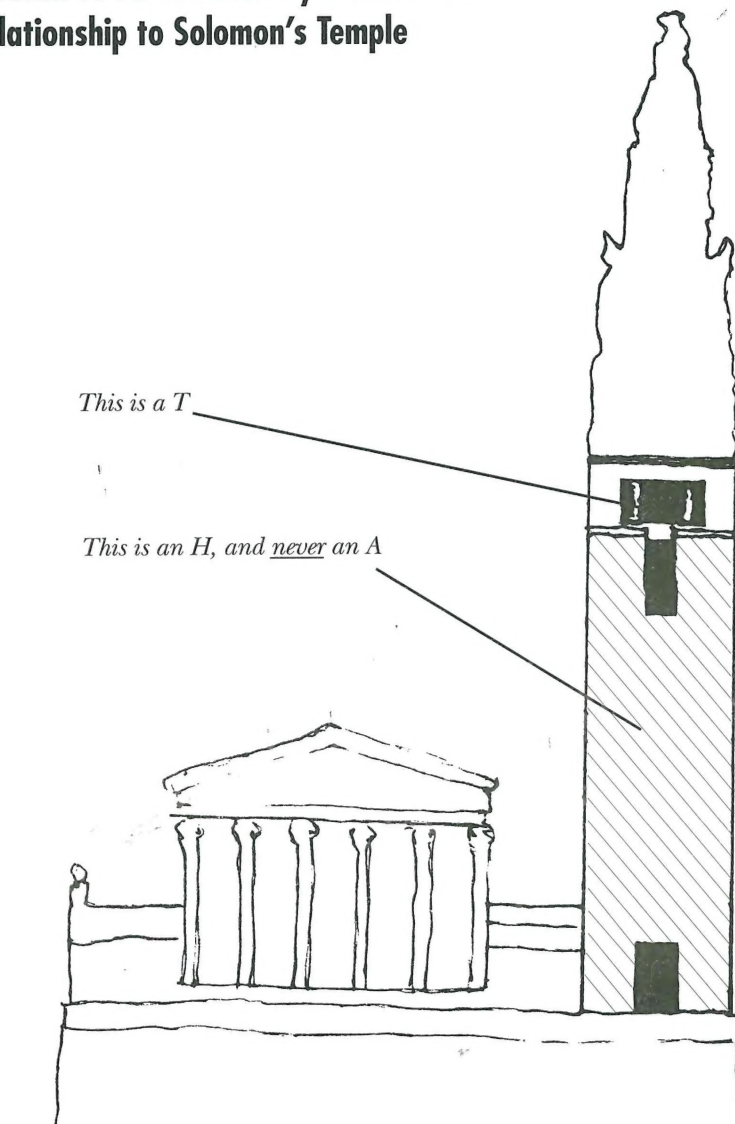
SAM McKinstry's response (*Newsletter* N°15) to my suggestions that St Vincent Street church is a mnemonic of the Temple in Jerusalem persists in belittling my arguments. In spite of my advancing years, I still enjoy reasonable sight and hearing.

I do not ignore McKinstry's arguments. I mentioned (I did not dwell on) the number nine, but I also mentioned other numbers, and I set out the reasons why those numbers are significant. Of course every number from one to a hundred is included, but that is not the point.

Anyone who bothers to look at the St Vincent Street church (and I mean look, not glance at) will be struck by its very oddity. The tower is curious in the extreme, and it did not just happen. The Tau cross as a symbol of the Temple in Jerusalem (*Templum Hierosolymae*) is not my invention: it is described as such in many standard works of reference, as McKinstry would establish if he troubled to look it up. I suggest that the two Cherubim-heads in the tower T actually suggest the arrangement as described in the Old Testament relating to the Temple. The crowning feature of the tower has numerical and symbolic significance too, which I have already described.

McKinstry has grudgingly accepted the possibility that I might have something in relation to Thomson's schemes of decorations in domestic interiors (dining and living-rooms). If he can admit there is some interest in the decorations of his houses, and that those decorative schemes might have Freemasonic significance, or at least significance beyond the mere whim of a decorator, then why is he so reluctant to admit symbolic or even allegorical allusions in a church?

I do not believe for one moment that an architect of the stature of Thomson juxtaposed Classical and Egyptian elements in such a personal and original way without reason. Yes,



Demonstration of T over H = Templum Hierosolymae

indeed Presbyterians believed that Christianity superseded much in the Old Testament, but is he seriously suggesting that Presbyterians ignored the pre-Christian contents of the Bible? I know they did nothing of the kind, and indeed that the Old Testament played (and plays) no small part in Presbyterianism. St Vincent Street church is built on a platform, suggesting building the Church on the earlier foundation. In France and elsewhere Protestant churches were called 'temples' in earlier centuries, for various reasons I have discussed elsewhere. I suggest that St Vincent Street is an amalgam of Church and Temple, demonstrating the union between the New and

Old Testaments. I am not going to debate with McKinstry abstruse arguments about how many angels can dance on the end of a pin, but what I can do is to suggest to him (and to others) that the St Vincent Street church did not just happen: it is like that for a reason, and Thomson was far too intelligent to just pile stuff together on a whim.

The T-shaped opening in the tower containing the two heads facing each other (referring to Cherubims) is hardly an entablature, as it is an opening. It is T cut in the wall. McKinstry must have sight problems if he thinks the tower is like an A. If he reads my piece he will see I am

Continued on Page 16

'Dear Alec...' author found

THE notes appended to this letter in the December 1995 *Newsletter* state that the "precise identity of the writer is a puzzle". Examination of the signature on the original (of which we have a copy) reveals that it is probably 'J.T.' rather than 'J.S.' Nicholson. This would suggest that the author was Jamieson Thomas Nicholson.

Peter Nicholson (1765–1844), the architect and writer on building matters, was married twice. By his first wife (Mary Perry) he had a son Michael Angelo Nicholson whose daughter, Jane, married Alexander Thomson. J.T. Nicholson was Peter Nicholson's son by his second marriage (to Jane Jamieson).

Jamieson T. Nicholson was born about 1817, the same year as Thomson. He married Marion J. Govan in Govan(!) on 17 June 1851 and had a son, Roderick, born 21 April 1857. Roderick was born at

Bloomfield Place, Hillhead, Partick and on his birth certificate, his father's occupation is given as 'Gentleman'.

J.T. Nicholson appears on the 1851 Census living in Newton Villa, Northumberland with his aunt, Margaret Jamieson. Under 'Occupation' he is here listed as 'annuitant'. An article on Peter Nicholson (*The Civil Engineer and Architects' Journal*, November 1844, p425–427) mentions that in 1844 his son, J.T. Nicholson, was employed on the Lancaster & Carlisle Railway, although in what capacity is not mentioned.

None of this suggests a military career although family tradition has it that J.T. Nicholson became an East India merchant. Perhaps the East India Company employed its own militia which he was part of, and which became involved in the fighting at Banda, or perhaps he became

an East India merchant after service in the army? It would be interesting to know which regiment was involved at Banda.

The family greetings must presumably refer to Jane Thomson and her two surviving sisters Jessie and Nancy and to Thomson's young family at that time.

We would be interested to know if anyone has any information on Jamieson Thomas Nicholson and his family.

Alistair and May Thomson Macdonald

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More Temple Talk

Continued from Page 15

not talking about the opening at the base of the tower: I think the tower itself, beneath the Cherubims and above the plinth, is an H. TH stands for Templum Hierosolymae, or even for Thomson.

No, T-shapes are not necessarily mnemonics of the Temple, but with those two figures in the cross-bar of the T, I suggest the T in St Vincent Street is indeed a mnemonic of the Temple.

The South Kensington temple of the arts has indeed a T in a similar position to that of St Vincent Street church, but I do not think it has the Cherubim-heads. But McKinstry should not forget that the whole idea of South Kensington was high-minded and public-spirited, worthy of the highest ideals, and therefore might well have had a Freemasonic connection as well. So I do not see it as a 'problem' at all.

McKinstry's dismissal of my careful arguments about the top of the St Vincent Street tower verges on the discourteous. The arguments are fair and, I think, hold water. Airy references to Gothic spires will not wash,

for they offer no parallels.

I do not propose any 'get-out'. Nineteenth-century Freemasons did not discuss the Craft openly, and Thomson did not actually write about it or lecture in public about it. That does not mean he did not demonstrate an affiliation with the Craft, or at least a deep knowledge of many of the architectural aspects that concerned the Craft. An architect, after all, leaves us drawings and buildings that are usually more fluent than anything he writes or delivers in speech. And an architect of Thomson's ability and originality did not, in spite of what McKinstry might hold, create the buildings and interiors he did without very good reason. To think otherwise is absurd.

Incidentally, the Triple Tau (the nineteenth letter of the Greek alphabet) was formed of three Tau letters, and is specifically recognized in Freemasonry as an abbreviation for Templum Hierosolymae, the H formed of two Tau letters set on their sides with the bases of their verticals joined. It is an important symbol of Royal Arch Masonry, the 'supreme Order'.

THE NEWSLETTER

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Membership of the Society costs £10 per year (Ordinary), £15 per year (Joint / Family), £6 per year (Reduced Rate for students, pensioners and unwaged) and £25 per year (Corporate Rate). Printed by Partick Print & Design Ltd, Unit H, Purdon Street, Glasgow G11 6AF.

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